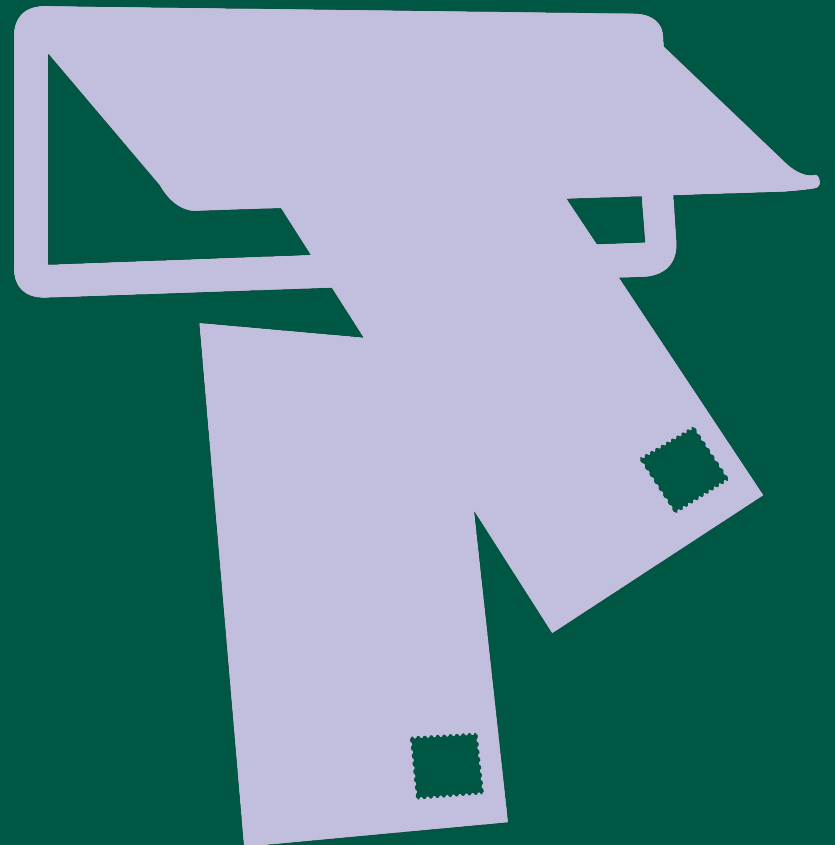


# On the receiving end

How post can enable domestic abuse



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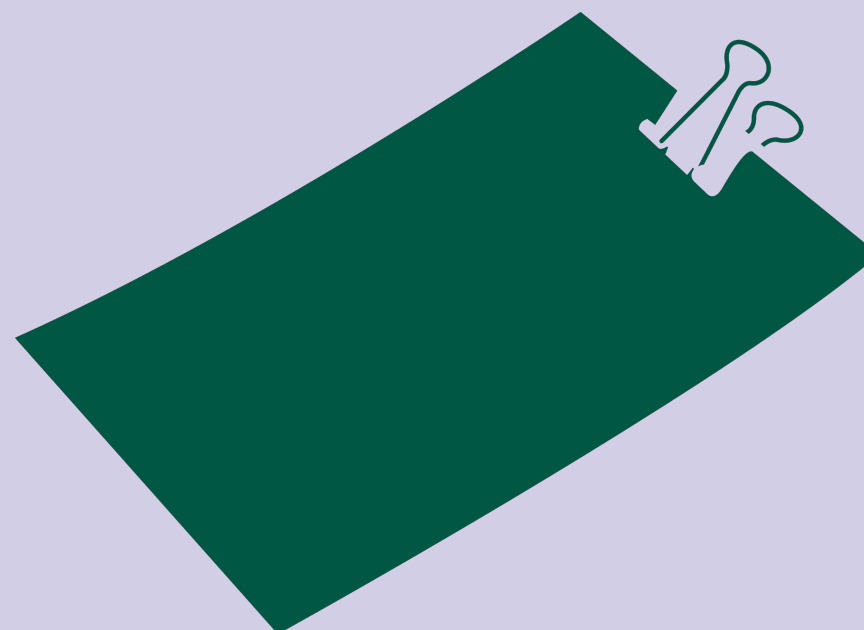
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# Executive Summary

## The problem

Survivors of domestic abuse face significant harm because their post isn't secure and their address is regularly disclosed.

**Half of survivors of domestic abuse have their post intercepted by the perpetrator.**

Survivors we spoke to missed out on cancer treatments, faced thousands of pounds of debt from unpaid bills, and lost touch with their support networks as a result of perpetrators hiding their letters.

Perpetrators also use information they find in survivors' letters to discredit them to certain services, to financially abuse them, and to control and monitor their movements.

When survivors leave the home where they experienced abuse, they often need to keep their whereabouts secret. However, **40% of survivors who've left the home have had an agency disclose their new address to the perpetrator.**

This puts their safety at significant risk and leads survivors to avoid engaging with services for fear of giving out their address.

## The impact



### Financial

Survivors have lost **£7.1 billion** in the last 10 years as a result of perpetrators intercepting their post.



### Practical

Survivors miss appointments with essential services because perpetrators hide their letters. And 1 in 2 survivors who have left the home avoid engaging with a service because they don't want to give out their address.



### Safety

**71% of survivors who had their new address disclosed** by an agency **said their safety was compromised as a result.**



### Wellbeing

Over half felt stressed or anxious as a result of having their post intercepted.

## Recommendations

1

The government should invest in an 'Address & Collect' service, provided at post offices, to ensure people in unsafe or untraditional living situations have equal access to post.

2

The Information Commissioner's Office should investigate the significant number of data breaches, highlighted by this research, that put survivors of domestic abuse at serious risk.

# The problem

## Interception of post

Letter containing important or sensitive information sent to survivor

Perpetrator intercepts the letter

Perpetrator has access to sensitive information

Perpetrator can use information from the letter to further abuse the survivor



Impact on safety

Perpetrator can hide letter with important information

Survivor misses important information, such as appointments with essential services



Practical impact

## Address security

Survivor has left home where abuse was taking place, and may want to keep whereabouts secret from perpetrator

Survivor needs to give out address to access services such as bank accounts, and to receive communication from service providers

Perpetrator gets service provider to disclose survivor's new address

To mitigate safety risks, the survivor stops giving out their address



Financial impact



Impact on wellbeing

# In numbers

Half of survivors of domestic abuse have their post intercepted by the perpetrator

↓ Survivors lost **£7.1 billion** in the last 10 years as a result

40% had their new address revealed to the perpetrator by a service provider

71%

← said their safety was compromised as a result

1 in 2

survivors avoided engaging with a service because they didn't want to give out their new address

## 2. Background

# Domestic abuse in the UK

1 in 4 women and 1 in 6 men will experience domestic abuse in their lifetime.<sup>1</sup> UK law describes domestic abuse as 'any incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening behaviour, violence or abuse between those aged 16 or over who are, or have been, intimate partners or family members regardless of gender or sexuality.'<sup>2</sup> Previously, a relationship was only seen as abusive if physical violence took place. Today there is greater understanding of the complex dynamics of abuse. This means that sexual, economic, emotional, and psychological abuse are now widely recognised as constituting abuse in a relationship.

Domestic abuse is ultimately about power and control. Perpetrators often strive to make the survivor dependent on them, cutting off any links to friends, family and the outside world. Abuse is typically a pattern of behaviours and incidents over a long period of time, but it can also be a single incident. It can remain hidden even from the survivors closest contacts. The impact of abuse and trauma on survivors who manage to flee can stay with them long after the abuse itself has ended. It can also have wide reaching impacts on children, friends and loved ones too.

Domestic abuse is a gendered crime. Women are nearly twice as likely to experience domestic abuse as men, and men are significantly more likely to be repeat perpetrators.<sup>3</sup> However, men, non-binary people, and people in same sex relationships also experience domestic abuse, and all survivors should have access to specialist support.

Making sure survivors can escape abuse safely is essential for limiting the negative impacts of abuse on survivors and their families. It's also important that survivors are able to engage fully with specialist support and services after having suffered abuse.

# Post plays a vital role in accessing essential services

In order for people to engage with many essential services, it's necessary to have a place to receive post, and an address to put on applications.



Some interactions with services can now be managed online, such as paying bills and applying for benefits. However, many services still use post as the main, or only, form of communication.

Besides, many people don't have regular access to the internet, or don't have the digital skills needed to manage their services online. This means they're reliant on post as a method of communication.

People need to be able to receive the letters they're sent to engage with essential services.

The consequences of missing post can be severe. Missing a utility bill might push you into debt, missing a benefits letter containing an appointment date might result in a benefits sanction, and missing a hospital letter with a diagnosis might mean you don't get the treatment or support you need.

Information that service providers send through the post is often important, time sensitive, and confidential. That's why it's important that people can receive post on a regular basis, free from interference.

## What's in an address?

An address is often used as a form of identification. Many services require an address to register, even if they'll never send the user a letter through the post.

- Banks require an address to verify the account holder when they open an account
- Claimants can manage Universal Credit online, but they still need to input their postcode to apply
- Schools require an address to check the child's in the catchment area

For some services, such as GP surgeries, it's meant to be possible to register without an address, but in reality this often isn't the case.

The way many systems are designed makes it impossible for someone to register without an address, locking people out of key services.



# 3. Interception of post

# Perpetrators intercept survivors' post





**Half of survivors of domestic abuse have their post intercepted by the perpetrator.**

By interception, we mean that the perpetrator takes the post addressed to the survivor and does any of the following:

- Hides it
- Opens it
- Reads it
- Stops the survivor accessing it
- Destroys it

Some perpetrators intercept all of a survivor's post, others target financial correspondence, letters from certain services, or personal correspondence.

Perpetrators will often use post as a way to stalk, harass and further exercise coercive control. The impacts of this for survivors can be very serious:

-  Significant debt built up in the survivor's name, leading to poor a credit rating and reducing options for leaving.
-  Missing out on appointments with essential services, leading to sanctions and dropping down waiting lists.
-  Perpetrators reacting violently to information discovered in post, or using information to discredit survivors.
-  Survivor becoming isolated from any support network, and feeling anxious, stressed or trapped.

***"Funny isn't it? You think something as simple as post would be relatively harmless, but [domestic abuse] is about control. And I think post is a window in the world." - Luke***



# Beth found over 600 letters hidden in a suitcase

When Beth was living with the perpetrator, it hadn't occurred to her that he was hiding any of her post.

*"I'd think 'That's weird, I didn't get a birthday card from...' and I'm a stickler for sending a thank you card."*

One day before Christmas, Beth got a call from HMRC. They said they'd fined her because she hadn't responded to letters about her Self Assessment.

Unbeknownst to her, she'd been sent forms to fill out about her earnings. Since she'd not filled out the forms, HMRC had paid her too much child benefit, and they fined her for not informing them about the error. She also had to pay back the money she shouldn't have received, plus interest.

After this call she immediately put two and two together. She thought about all her partner's interrogatory questions about things he couldn't have known about. Beth realised he must have seen the information in letters sent to her through the post.

**She searched the home and discovered a suitcase containing around 600 letters.**

He'd hidden her mail, including letters that she'd needed to respond to, for example about changes to her work pension scheme. He'd also been checking up on her movements by going through her bank statements.



# Perpetrators hide post to isolate survivors...

## 72% of survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator actively hid information from them

Survivors told us that perpetrators of abuse hid letters sent by friends and family, as well as letters containing important information about survivors' health, employment, benefits, and finances.

This means survivors lose access to services and support networks that they desperately need.

We heard from survivors that not receiving post when they were expecting to made them question their own sanity and increased feelings of self-doubt. One survivor described it as 'psychological warfare'.

## Hiding letters from friends and family

1 in 3 survivors who had their post intercepted lost touch with their family and friends as a result.

Isolating survivors from their support networks creates an additional barrier to leaving, and keeps them dependent on the perpetrator.

Survivors told us that perpetrators hide letters from friends and family, wedding invites, and birthday cards.

The consequences of missing these letters included missing out on friends' weddings and falling out with family because they hadn't replied to certain letters.

Survivors told us that perpetrators would also hide letters from their children to make them feel more isolated.

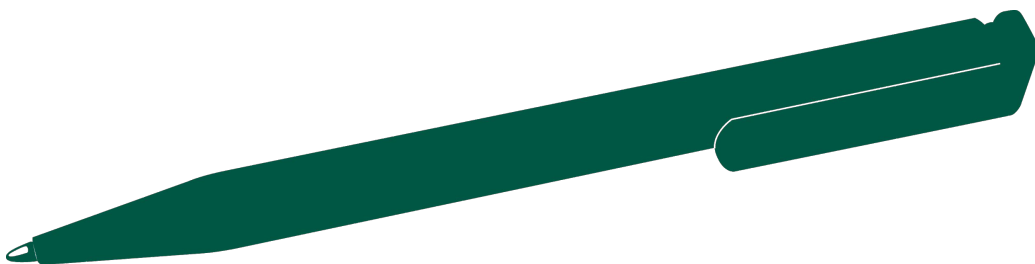
## Hiding post affects children

If children are living with the survivor during the abuse, they can also be affected by the perpetrator hiding post.

Children missed out on school, health appointments, and lost touch with grandparents or other relatives - all because of the perpetrator hiding their post.

This can be particularly harmful to children's health and well-being.

*"[W]hat she would do is, if invitations arrived to events, they would disappear. There was a dear friend's wedding actually..the wedding invite never appeared. And I just assumed well obviously I haven't made the list. So, she had selected it was an event we were not to go to as a family." - Luke*



# ... and to stop survivors receiving support

## Hiding appointment letters

**1 in 3 survivors who had their post intercepted, missed important appointments because of it.**

Survivors told us they missed court appearances, appointments with domestic abuse agencies, and benefits assessments because the perpetrator hid their post.

Missing appointments means survivors lose out on support they're entitled to and can struggle to engage with services.

*"He took my post, that's how I lost my PIP number - he hid hospital appointments for my hip, he hid the exercises to do for my hip to keep me housebound... He'd hide my appointment letters - With the PIP, he'd hide them, the PIP forms... so they'd stopped the money" - Amy*

Perpetrators may hide letters to punish survivors or make them less able to leave. For instance, a survivor told us they missed out on drug and alcohol rehabilitation services, which created an extra barrier to leaving the relationship.

Another person told us that they weren't able to access gender reassignment surgery because their abuser was hiding their post.

## Hiding medical letters

By hiding letters about medical conditions and appointments, perpetrators stop survivors getting the treatment they need.

Survivors told us they missed appointments about cervical cancer and liver failure. For some survivors, this left them with serious conditions that could have been prevented had they attended appointments earlier.

*"I could have had breast cancer and that with missing the appointments... I've had breast cancer, and I go for mammograms and was missing appointments because he was hiding them and I was worried and panicking that it was back." - Steph*

## Missed appointments worsen a survivor's situation

One survivor who missed appointments for cervical cancer, said social services took away custody of her children because she was perceived as not looking after herself.

Another survivor told us she missed hospital appointments for her son's epilepsy as a result of the perpetrator hiding the appointment letters. She felt unable to explain why to the hospital, which made her feel like a bad mother and made her worry about losing her kids.

# Megan's liver failed after her partner hid letters from the hospital

**Megan's ex-partner hid important appointment letters to stop her accessing the medical treatment she needed.**

Megan's ex-partner was extremely controlling and aggressive. He would decide what she wore, what she did, and where she went.

He also controlled her access to post. This included anything to do with her benefits, hospital appointments, appointments with drug and alcohol services, and personal post from family, including cash gifts they posted.

Megan has been reliant on alcohol for many years, and had started to become seriously ill. However, her ex-partner hid letters about hospital appointments so she couldn't attend them.

This meant Megan didn't get the treatment she needed and, because she missed appointments, she was pushed down the waiting list.

*"Well, [the hospital department] actually wiped me off their list because I missed so many appointments. And then I went to the doctor...but the doctor re-referred me and obviously all them letters have gone to him again... I waited nearly 2 years for those appointments and now I've got to do it all again."*

**Megan's liver is starting to fail as a direct result of missing appointments.**

*"Because I missed the appointments with the hospital, and I missed the appointment [to drug and alcohol services], now my liver is starting to fail. This would all have been sorted if I had had my appointments."*



# Perpetrators use information found in letters to manipulate and control survivors

## 40% of survivors said the perpetrator used information from their post to control or abuse them further

As well as hiding post, many perpetrators open and read survivors' post. They use the information they find to further abuse or control survivors.

Survivors told us that perpetrators could react violently after opening their post. One survivor described post as a 'flash point' in their relationship.



## Using post to monitor, track or control

Perpetrators read survivors' post to monitor their behaviours, track their whereabouts, and control them further.

The kinds of letters they use to do this include bank statements and phone bills.

Reading these letters allows perpetrators to monitor who survivors are talking to and check if they've been where they say they have.

For instance, perpetrators can check bank statements to see when and where survivors spent money on petrol.

Perpetrators can also use information to control survivors' movements. One survivor told us that her abuser stopped her from attending empowering events aimed at women, after intercepting her post.

This is all about exerting control over the survivor.

## Using information in letters to discredit survivors

Perpetrators use information they find through opening and reading survivors' post to discredit them to services or their support networks.

A survivor told us that after intercepting a letter about a mental health appointment, the perpetrator called up the hospital to find out more information, and passed this on to his solicitor. He then demanded her medical records as proof she was unfit to look after her children.

Another survivor faced harsher sentencing in a court hearing because a previous court letter she'd never received was vandalised by her abuser and sent back to the court.

Perpetrators also use private information to damage survivors' reputations by sharing it with their family or friends.

## Ayesha's family disowned her after her ex-husband showed them her phone bill



**Ayesha's ex-husband used private information he found in her post to further abuse her.**

During the relationship, he intercepted all her post. He was financially, physically, and emotionally abusive.

He intercepted her phone bills to monitor who she spoke with. He would check the numbers to see if she'd been speaking with any men. After intercepting her phone bill and discovering that she'd been phoning a male colleague from work, he threatened to kill her.

He then used this information against her, to alienate her from her family. He accused her of having an affair, and showed her family that she'd been speaking to other men.

*"So that's the reason I lost my family, is because of him having something in black and white to show that I'm phoning somebody else and talking to somebody else... He just had to get some little bit of evidence together that I'm getting people phoning me that are male, so my phone [bill] being itemised, whichever ones were male, he highlighted them and showed them to my parents"*

**Ayesha's family disowned her after being shown the phone bill her ex-husband had intercepted as 'proof'.**

The fact that her family took his side after the years of abuse she suffered was the final straw for Ayesha, and she decided to take an overdose to end her life.

Fortunately, friends intervened and she didn't go through with it.



# Post is used to conduct economic abuse

## 9 in 10 survivors who had their post intercepted were impacted financially

By intercepting bills and financial statements, perpetrators cause significant financial harm to survivors. They may hide bills, use information sent through the post to take control of the survivor's finances, take out credit in the survivor's name, or steal cash gifts sent through the post.

**Hiding bills** Perpetrators often hide bills from survivors. This means survivors aren't aware they have a bill, so it goes unpaid. Survivors told us that perpetrators would also hide reminder letters, collection notices, and County Court Judgements. Some perpetrators change accounts into the survivor's name, then stop payments and hide any bills that come in the post.

This leaves survivors with large amounts of debt in their name and a poor credit rating, making it harder to leave the perpetrator.

*"Unbeknownst to me, he would get my bills but not tell me about them, or he would say that the bills were paid off ... and about two years later I was getting red notices all of a sudden saying that I hadn't paid my bills in over two years ... my husband stopped paying my bills and never told me about it "* -

**Alison**

*"I obviously wasn't able to open my post so bills were being issued and my bank just started applying charges ... I think there's over £2,000 worth of charges that were applied to my account during the time when things were particularly difficult. That's something that I'm still trying to recover from. That's actually completely obliterated my credit score."* - **Hazel**

## Controlling access to money

2 in 5 survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator used it to control their finances. This includes checking how much money the survivor has, whether they've spent any money and what on, and controlling how much of their own money they could spend. Controlling money is one of the most prominent forms of coercive control.

*"The post that came with the benefits, my name would be on the post but he wouldn't let me look at it and he'd lock it away. Child benefit, working tax credit, child credit, housing benefit... I don't know what was going into that account"* - **Sara**



# Post is used to conduct economic abuse

## Taking out credit in survivors' names

1 in 3 survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator built up debt in their name. Alongside debt built up from unpaid utility bills, many survivors face significant debt when perpetrators take out credit in their name. We heard about perpetrators applying for loans in the survivor's name, intercepting applications and paperwork for credit cards, mortgages, loans, and transfers of ownership, and then forging the survivor's signature to approve 'applications'.



Survivors lost  
**£7.1 billion**  
in the last 10 years  
because perpetrators  
intercepted their post

*"The post comes through to both of our names, but he's never showed me this post. He's forged my signature that I've agreed to... an extra loan taken out for home improvements. I think it was about £30k, but he's obviously put that as deposit down to buy another house... he forged my signature to do it and opened the post that came through that obviously I should have seen. I didn't know, I wasn't aware of it, and I didn't sign for it. And it's my word against his then." - Natalie*

## Stealing from survivors' accounts

Almost half of survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator spent their money. Perpetrators use financial information, new debit cards and PINs that come through the post to transfer, spend, or withdraw money from the survivor's account.

## Stealing cash gifts

Many survivors said their family would send them cash, either as a gift or to help them with their situation. But often perpetrators would steal this money before survivors even knew it existed.

***"Christmas cards, birthday cards with cash in... I didn't know anything about it. And I'd fall out with my family saying I was ungrateful because I hadn't phoned and said thanks... It went on for a couple of years on Easter, Christmas, Whitsun, birthdays.... a good few hundred quid"***

# Helen's ex-partner hid her bills, leaving her with £18,000 of debt

**Helen suffered significant financial losses because her ex-partner intercepted her post.**

Helen's ex-partner was financially abusive and used to open all her post. He put all the utility bills into her name but intercepted them when they came through the post. As a result, the bills weren't getting paid. He even hid the reminder notices and County Court Judgement paperwork.

She had no idea he was racking up debt in her name.

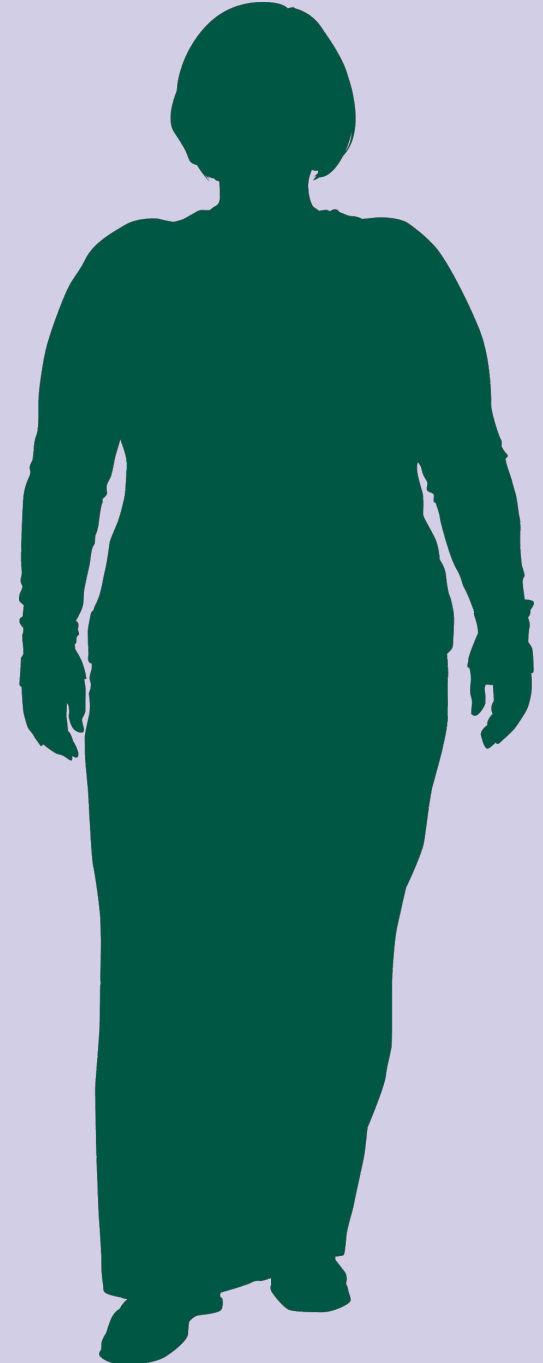
Helen had also opened savings accounts for her 3 kids, with her name as signatory. He used statements that were sent through the post to get the information necessary to change all their accounts into his name.

**Helen was left with over £18,000 of debt from unpaid bills.**

The debt and County Court Judgements destroyed her credit rating, meaning she can't get a mortgage and options for renting a place to live are very limited.

*"It made it very, very difficult for me to get out. Because it wasn't easy for me to just go and rent somewhere because he left me with bad credit"*

*"I think from the women I speak to that is really common. It just reduces your choices, it reduces your options."*



# Post interception makes survivors feel trapped

## Half of survivors who had their post intercepted felt trapped in the abusive relationship as a result

Not having access to their post, because of interception, means survivors don't have control over their own lives. This can leave them feeling helpless, trapped, and lacking self-confidence.

The thought of leaving can seem impossible because of how having their post intercepted has impacted them.

Not only do survivors feel isolated, they also face practical and financial barriers from post interception that make it harder to leave.

## Too ill to leave

Perpetrators might prevent survivors from getting the medical treatment they need, to stop them from being well enough to leave.

One survivor told us that her abuser hid letters about hospital appointments and exercises for her hip injury, to keep her housebound.

## Feeling isolated

By intercepting survivors' post, perpetrators control survivors' access to the outside world.

Hiding letters means survivors might miss out on communication from friends and family members.

By reading survivors' post to monitor and track them, survivors might also struggle to build relationships for fear of being 'found out'.

This means survivors become isolated from their support networks, making it harder to tell anyone about their situation, and ultimately to leave.

## No access to funds

Economic abuse through the interception of post leaves survivors with little or no access to funds.

This might be because they have debt in their name, have lost out on benefits they were entitled to, or have no access to their own money.

Often, survivors will have poor credit ratings as a result of economic abuse, and will struggle to rent privately.

Housing options for survivors planning to leave are extremely limited. This means many face homelessness or housing insecurity for a long time.

Many survivors face further obstacles to leaving because they are financially dependent on their abuser. They might never have been allowed to open their own post or manage their own finances.

# Luke lived in fear of what the post would bring

Luke still experiences anxiety related to post because of how integral it was to the abuse.

Luke's ex-wife was verbally and physically abusive, and highly controlling. Luke had no access to their money, his ex-wife managed all their finances, and he had no sight of any financial correspondence.

**The first time she was physically abusive towards him, it was because of a letter she had intercepted about his credit limit.**

"The letters from the credit company arrived approving [an extension to credit limits]. It was opened by her. I was in the shower, and was attacked in the shower. That was the first time that ever happened... she clawed me, hit me, and beat me to the ground eventually. Around an item of post that I hadn't even realised had occurred."

*"So, the post for years became very much almost a flash point during the relationship. Very deeply difficult, actually."*

*"And through the marriage, there was this constant fear of the postman arriving, and whatever the postman may bring"*

As well as financial information, she also 'pre-screened' other kinds of post. For example, she would hide invites to social occasions. She once hid an invite to a friend's wedding, so Luke assumed he hadn't made the list. He found out months later after bumping into the friend.



## 4. Address security

# Escaping the abuse

Escaping abuse is a difficult process for survivors, and is rarely a straightforward journey. It often takes several attempts for a survivor to leave the abuse permanently.<sup>4</sup> The time when they are fleeing abuse is also the most dangerous time for survivors. As the perpetrator feels they are losing control, they might increase their efforts to regain power. There's a dramatic increase in the likelihood of violence during this time. In the UK, 2 women are killed by their partner or ex-partner every week. In 2017, 55% of these women were killed within the first month of separation and 87% within the first year.<sup>5</sup> For many survivors, keeping their address secret can be a matter of life or death. Alongside significant risks to their safety, survivors face other barriers to escaping the perpetrator. These include isolation, trauma, fear of losing their children, low confidence, and a lack of safe housing options.

## Where do survivors first go when fleeing the home where they experienced abuse?



# Services disclose survivors' new addresses

## 40% of survivors have had their new address disclosed to the perpetrator by an agency

Despite the importance for many survivors of keeping their address secret, we found that disclosure can happen in a number of ways.

A letter with the survivor's new address on it might be sent to their former address and received by the perpetrator. We heard stories of schools, children's services, and local authorities disclosing addresses in this way.

Perpetrators can often be extremely manipulative, and can find out where the survivor has moved to by contacting an agency or service and persuading them to give out the address.

This is particularly a problem where children are involved, as the perpetrator can act as a concerned

parent, or cite their 'parental right' to have access to information about where their child has moved to.

We found that those with children living with them at the time of the abuse were more likely to have had their new address disclosed to the perpetrator.

**Half (52%) of survivors with children, who left the home where the abuse took place, experienced an agency disclosing their address to a perpetrator.**

Some survivors, in particular those living in a refuge with access to a refuge PO box, report no issues with having their address disclosed. There were some examples of good practice. For example, a GP receptionist who refused to give out a survivor's new address to the perpetrator as they knew the family's situation.

However, many survivors say the service providers they interact with are either

careless or unaware of the risks associated with disclosure.

**Survivors also encounter systems that make it difficult to keep addresses secret.**

One person we spoke to had arranged for the GP to put a flag on the system to not show her address on prescriptions as the perpetrator was finding it out this way. This worked well for a while, but the practice manager said it was too 'difficult' for them to do prescriptions for the children without an address.

Mandy, a specialist health care professional, was required to have her details listed on a professional online register, which lists the region she lives in. She battled to have her old region listed as she was worried she could be tracked down easily. Eventually, they agreed to use her old region, but having to fight for the change was a reminder that she's 'not a normal person'.



# Social services told Debby's abusive ex-partner where she was living

Debby was with her ex-partner for 18 years. He was both physically and financially abusive. She managed to leave the relationship, fleeing with the children without warning, and immediately went into hiding.

She needs to keep her whereabouts secret, but this has been difficult. She still has shared custody of the children with her ex-husband and **agencies have revealed her address to him on 3 separate occasions** so far, in spite of knowing the risks.

*"I moved a couple of times and the first time Social Services gave him my address. And then the second time the school gave him my address. Allowed him to photograph it, along with my telephone number. The next day, it was literally the next day, the washing line was taken down... and was put across my back door. Two days later the table and chairs were moved into the middle of my driveway. I had 'c\*\*t' sprayed on my wall."*

Debby is now at risk of arson and doesn't feel safe in her own home.

*"I don't feel safe anymore...it makes it so much harder to recover when you don't feel safe... And then every time I heard something in the garden, I was fearful. I was fearful that it was him."*

These problems make her feel like the abuse is never ending.

*"He has all sorts of information about me that he shouldn't have. And post is a massive part of it... That means that the abuse is never going to end."*



# Address disclosures have serious impacts

## 71% of survivors felt their safety was compromised as a result of an agency disclosing their address

Survivors are at a significant risk of harm when they've left the home where they experienced abuse. So having their address disclosed to the perpetrator poses a real threat to their safety.

Many survivors we spoke to had to move as a result of having their address disclosed to the perpetrator, sometimes several times. This uprooting can have a real impact on survivors health and wellbeing.

**"I was settled and didn't want to move. I was on the housing list to get a house, and then I had to move to a different refuge and my housing search had to start all over again and it took a bit longer. It was really unsettling." - Anita**

*"When I sent the paperwork to the DVLA to change the ownership of the vehicle ... even though it was my car that I drove all the time... they notified him with the new paperwork details and it had my new address on it.*

*So I had a phone call stating I needed to get out of there because there was a very real threat to life because he had found out where we were...*

*And lo and behold my last place of employment did contact me at one point and said, "he did show up here shortly after you left, you got out just in time." - Catherine*

Another impact of address disclosure is that survivors are reluctant to engage with services if they have to provide information about where they're living.

## Half (51%) of survivors avoid engaging with services because they don't want to give out their new address.

This can mean they miss out on a whole range of services from healthcare to education to housing. Some of these, such as mental health or addiction support services, might be lifesaving.

***"Fear of having to run again... call the police, seek sanctuary and move again... That's physically stopped me [giving out my address]. I should be going to the doctor at the moment... I don't want to risk registering."***

Survivors describe that resisting giving out their address makes them feel like they're "not really a human being...[just] ... a victim of domestic abuse."

This fear of disclosure ultimately prevents survivors from accessing the support they need and rebuilding their lives.

# Amy thinks she'll spend her whole life moving

Amy is 19 and has a young child. She lived with her abusive partner for 3 years. Amy's ex-partner controlled her access to money and which of her friends she was allowed to see.

She fled to a refuge with her young child. But due to injuries her child had as a result of the abuse from her partner, her child was taken into foster care and Amy was left homeless.

She eventually found housing and was reunited with her child, by which time she was pregnant again.

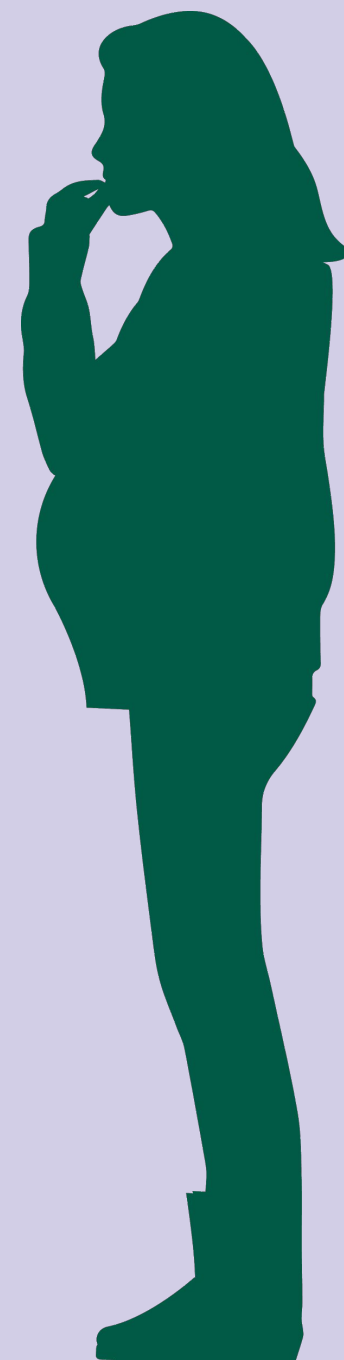
Despite the fact that she needs to keep their whereabouts secret, her ex has found out her address on numerous occasions.

The local authority disclosed her address to him on 2 separate occasions through paperwork. This had significant consequences for her and her unborn child.

***"They knew that it had to be confidential. They knew that I went into refuge and that he shouldn't have known where I was living. But they didn't really put much effort into making sure that they kept it a secret... After the first time they did that I miscarried. I think it was because of the stress of having to move again, and again."***

Amy's ex knows where they live now, so they are currently at risk. Although she's got a non-molestation order, he took her to court on a false charge, so now knows where they are because their address was on court paperwork. She struggles to see a resolution to her situation.

***"I'll probably spend my whole life moving"***



5. Is there a solution?

# An 'Address & Collect' service

An 'Address & Collect' service could provide a solution to many of the issues survivors of domestic abuse face with post interception and address security. An 'Address & Collect' service is a dedicated service giving people in unsafe or untraditional living situations equal access to post. Comparable to a PO box, it would provide users with an address and a place to pick up their post.

## An 'Address & Collect' service must:

### Enable survivors to collect their post

Providing a secure location where survivors' post can be held and collected would help prevent their post being intercepted by the perpetrator. This would reduce the harmful impacts felt as a result of postal interception.

### Be provided at a post office

A post office is the ideal location for an 'Address & Collect' service. With over 11,500 branches and a strict access criteria, post offices are a convenient place for most people to collect their post. They also tend to be in safer locations such as on high streets.

Given the social purpose and community role of the post office, we believe the network is well placed to provide this kind of service.

### Give survivors an address that's not linked to their residential address

Having a postal address that's not linked to the survivor's residential address would mean that even if the perpetrator did find out this address, they wouldn't be able to find where the survivor is living. This would reduce the very real threat to safety that survivors currently face, and may encourage survivors to engage with more essential services.

The postal address must not include details of the town the survivor is living in, or the location of the collection point. It is also vital that essential services, like banks, accept this form of address.

### Be free and accessible for the user

Survivors of domestic abuse, whether they are still living with the perpetrator or not, often have very little access to funds. For a service like this to be successful in helping survivors, it's essential that there's no cost imposed for the user. This service should also avoid imposing strict ID requirements on users, as this might prevent them from being able to access it.

# 6. Recommendations

# Recommendations

1

The government should invest in an *'Address & Collect'* service, provided at post offices, to ensure people in unsafe or untraditional living situations have equal access to post.

This is the second time Citizens Advice [research](#) has revealed a large group of UK residents who don't have adequate access to post, and who suffer severe consequences as a result.

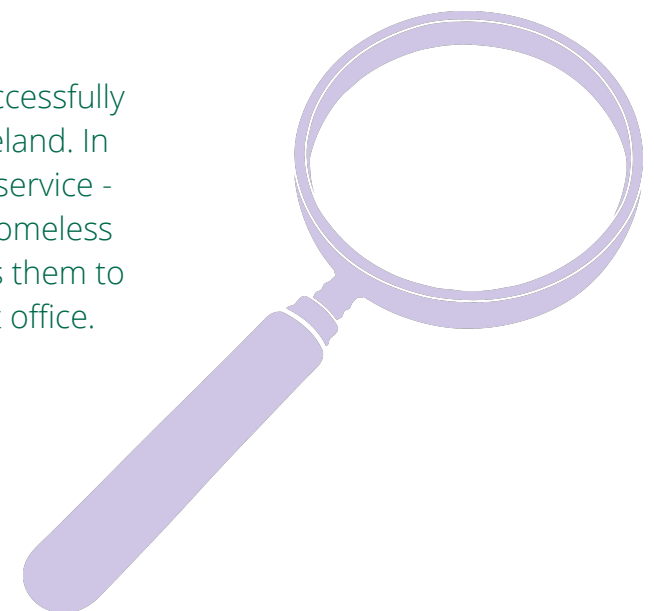
In 2000, the Government put in place a Universal Service Obligation to ensure everyone can access post. However, we have now shown that both homeless people and survivors of domestic abuse can't receive post in the reliable, accessible, and secure way that people in more traditional living situations take for granted.

Homeless people and survivors of domestic abuse aren't the only ones experiencing these issues. Anyone who doesn't have an address, who moves around frequently, or who doesn't have secure access to their post can face these problems.

As the department responsible for postal policy, it should be a priority for BEIS to ensure the postal service is truly universal.

**The department should invest in an *'Address & Collect'* service provided at post offices to ensure all residents have equal access to this essential service.**

A similar service has been successfully rolled out in post offices in Ireland. In 2019, An Post created a new service - [Address Point](#) - which gives homeless people an address and allows them to pick up their post from a post office.



# Recommendations

## 2

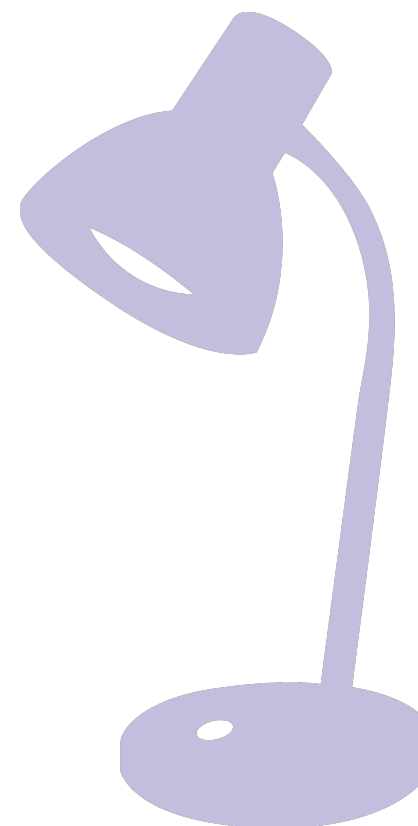
The Information Commissioner's Office should investigate the significant number of data breaches, highlighted by this research, that put survivors of domestic abuse at serious risk.

Disclosing someone's personal information without their consent is a serious matter in itself. But when doing so puts someone's life in danger, it's essential to do everything possible to prevent disclosures from happening.

It's unacceptable that 40% of survivors who left the home where they experienced abuse had their new address revealed to the perpetrator by an agency or service.

**The ICO should take immediate action to understand:**

- How these serious data breaches are happening
- Why they continue to happen
- What action must be taken to prevent another person's life being put in danger because of a data breach.





# Appendix

# Methodology

Citizens Advice commissioned Community Research to conduct qualitative research on the problems survivors of domestic abuse face relating to post interception and address security. This involved:

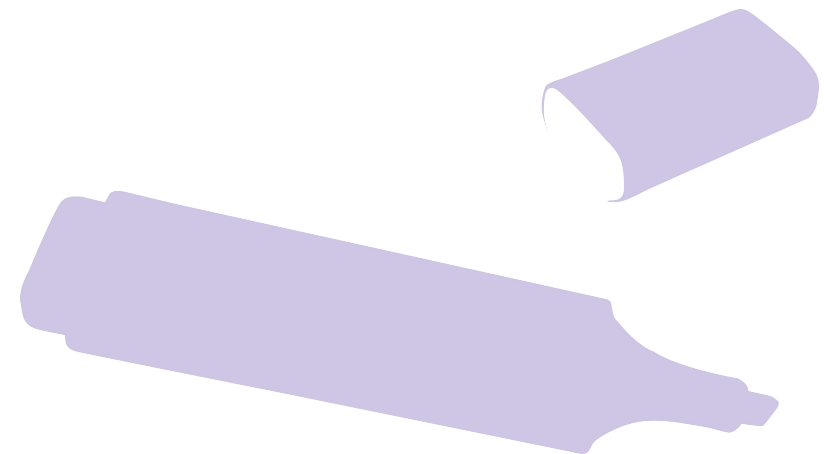
- 5 interviews with professional advisers
- 30 interviews with survivors of domestic abuse
- A follow-up online bulletin board with survivors

This research looked at survivors who had experienced abuse from a partner in England, Wales and Scotland. We wanted the interviews to reflect a wide range of experiences, so we ensured our sample was diverse in terms of gender, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation.

**Note: all case studies in this report have been given different names to preserve their anonymity**

We also commissioned Opinium to conduct a survey of 1,019 GB adults who had experienced abuse from a partner or family member in the last 10 years. This survey took place between 25 September and 3 October 2019.

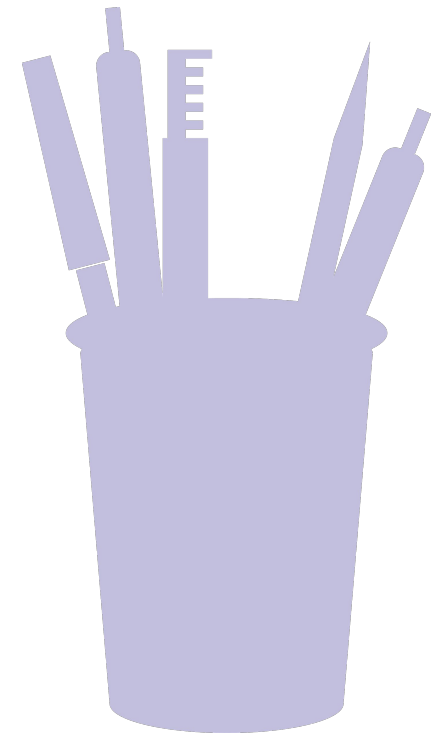
Opinium ran an initial incidence survey to understand the demographics of survivors within the general population. They used this information to weight the results from the survey with survivors appropriately.



# Acknowledgements

Citizens Advice would like to thank the following organisations for their support and involvement in this research:

- Women's Aid Federation of England
- Jewish Women's Aid
- Welsh Women's Aid
- Women's Aid Rhondda Cynon Taf
- Refuge
- Surviving Economic Abuse
- Safe Lives
- Nia Ending Violence
- Karma Nirvana
- Stonewall Housing
- Mankind
- NDAS
- Your Sanctuary
- Domestic Abuse Volunteer Support Service (DAVSS)
- Abused Men in Scotland (AMIS)
- Galop
- Respect
- ELDAS/ NCHA



# References

## Report statistics in full

- **47%** of people who experienced abuse in the last 10 years had their post intercepted by the perpetrator (By intercept, we mean that the perpetrator did any of the following; opened the survivor's post, read the survivor's post, stopped the survivor from having access to their post, hid the survivor's post from them)
- **35%** of survivors who had their post intercepted said they lost touch with their family and friends as a result.
- **32%** survivors who had their post intercepted, missed important appointments as a result.
- **40%** of survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator used information from their post to control or abuse them further
- **87%** of survivors who had their post intercepted were impacted financially
- **42%** of survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator used it to control their finances
- **35%** of survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator used it to build up debt in their name
- **45%** of survivors who had their post intercepted said the perpetrator used it to spend their money
- In total those who experienced abuse in the last 10 years have lost around **£7.1 billion** as a result of perpetrators intercepting their post
- **72%** of survivors who had their post intercepted, said the perpetrator actively hid information from them that was sent in the post
- **48%** of survivors who had their post intercepted felt trapped in the abusive relationship as a direct result

- **40%** of survivors who left the home where the abuse took place had their new address revealed to the perpetrator by an agency or service provider
- **51%** of survivors who left the home where abuse was taking place avoided engaging with an essential service because they didn't want to give out their new address
- **71%** of survivors who had their new address disclosed to the perpetrator by an agency said their safety was compromised as a result.
- **59%** of survivors who had their post intercepted felt stressed or anxious as a direct result
- We asked survivors (who left the home where they experienced abuse) where they first lived after leaving. **49%** said with a friend or family member, **19%** said in private rented accommodation, **12%** said in temporary/emergency accommodation, **10%** said in a refuge and **6%** in a hostel or b&b.
- **52%** of survivors with children, who left the home where the abuse took place, experienced an agency disclosing their address to a perpetrator.

## References to external data

1. Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) figures, [Domestic Violence in England and Wales report](#), 2018
2. Home Office, [Cross Government Definition of Domestic Violence - A Consultation](#), September 2012
3. Hester, M. (2009) [Who Does What to Whom? Gender and Domestic Violence Perpetrators](#), Bristol: University of Bristol in association with the Northern Rock Foundation, p.7
4. Refuge, [Barriers to Leaving](#), 2017
5. Women's Aid in partnership with Karen Ingala Smith, [The Femicide Census: 2017 findings](#), December 2018

# Note on £7.1 billion estimate

Citizens Advice estimates that survivors of domestic abuse have lost £7.1 billion in the last 10 years as a result of perpetrators intercepting their post. Here's how we came to that figure:

## Prevalence of domestic abuse:

Opinium conducted a nationally representative survey of 1,964 GB adults, in which 168 said they had experienced domestic abuse in the last 10 years.

This equates to 4.4 million GB adults.

$$\frac{168}{1,964} * 50,940,708 \text{ (GB adult population)}$$

$$= 4,357,454 \text{ or } 4.4 \text{ million.}$$

Opinium then conducted a survey of 1,019 GB adults who have experienced domestic abuse in the last 10 years and weighted their sample to reflect a nationally representative audience.

## Understanding the financial impact:

The survey found that 47% of survivors had their post intercepted, and of those 87% were financially impacted.

Those who were financially impacted were asked:

*"How much money - if any - did you lose as a result of your partner/ family member having access to your post? This could include: the amount of debt they built up in your name and the amount of money they spent from accessing your bank account, because of them intercepting your post. Please estimate how much you have lost to date."*

- Less than £500 [250.50],
- £501 - £1,000 [750.50]
- £1,001 - £2,000 [1,500.50]
- £2,001 - £3,000 [2,500.50]
- £3,001 - £5,000 [4,000.50]
- £5,001 - £7,500 [6,250.50]
- £7,501 - £10,000 [8,750.50]
- More than £10,000 [12,000.50]
- Don't know
- Prefer not to say

The figures in brackets reflect the midpoints used afterwards to estimate the total amount lost by those who answered this question.

The average amount lost by someone who said they were financially impacted was £4,364.90

Citizens Advice then calculated the average loss across all individuals in the 1,019 person weighted sample.

$$= \frac{\text{SUM}(\text{number who said they lost } \pounds x * \pounds x)}{\text{Total sample size (1,019)}}$$

$$= \pounds 1,628.70$$

We then multiplied that figure by the number of GB adults Opinium estimated to have experienced domestic abuse in the last 10 years to get the total loss over the last 10 years:

$$= \pounds 1,628.70 * 4,357,454$$

$$= \pounds 7.1 \text{ billion}$$

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Citizens Advice is the operating name of the The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux.  
Registered charity number 279057.

## If you're experiencing domestic abuse, get help and support here:

- **Read our online advice:**  
<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/family/gender-violence/domestic-violence-and-abuse/>
- **Contact a local domestic abuse service:**  
<https://www.womensaid.org.uk/domestic-abuse-directory/>
- **National Domestic Abuse Helpline** - 0808 2000 247
- **The Men's Advice Line, for male domestic abuse survivors** - 0808 801 0327
- **The Mix, free information and support for under 25s in the UK** - 0808 808 4994
- **National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline** - 0800 999 5428
- **Rights of Women advice lines** - there are a range of services available:  
<https://rightsofwomen.org.uk/get-advice/advice-lines/>
- **Women's Aid direct services - including the Live Chat Helpline:** [www.womensaid.org.uk](https://www.womensaid.org.uk)